

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

nist sentiment, helps to account for the split.)

Blacks, who vote overwhelmingly Democratic, could also upset the Reagan applecart. In 11 states, including New York, Massachusetts, and nine Southern states, the number of unregistered blacks exceeds Reagan's local 1980 margin of victory over Carter. And black voter turnout is on the upswing. About 43 percent of all blacks said they went to the polls in the 1982 congressional election, up 5.8 percentage points from 1978 levels.

All is not gloomy for the President. The South, where he is strong, gained electoral votes after the 1980 census. A continuing economic recovery or a foreign policy success (the Grenada invasion boosted his approval rating, at least temporarily) would be a shot in the arm. And if the 1984 election is as close as Schneider predicts, a John Anderson-style, third-party candidacy might well doom the Democrats.

Against Bipartisan Commissions

"The New Bipartisan Commissions" by Mark Greenberg and Rachel Flick, in *Journal of Contemporary Studies* (Fall 1983), Transaction Periodicals Consortium, Dept. 541, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

A new type of presidentially appointed commission is taking over jobs that America's top elected officials should be doing, and the change is symptomatic of a malfunction in the U.S. political system. So argue Greenberg and Flick, Senate and White House aides, respectively.

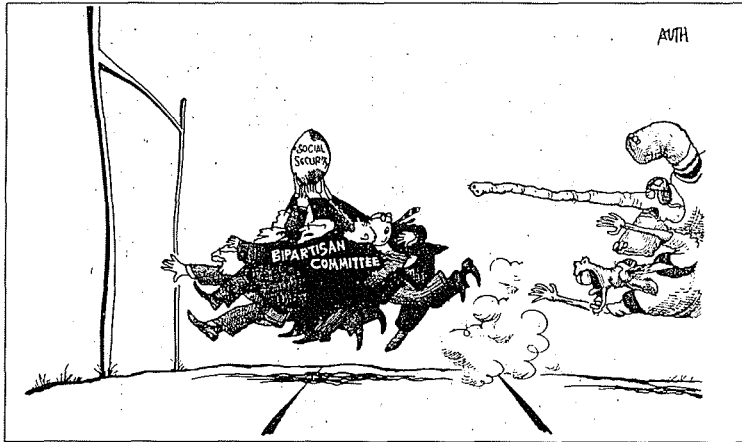
The first presidential commission was dispatched by George Washington in 1794 to investigate the Whiskey Rebellion in Pennsylvania. But such panels were rarely used before the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, who appointed 29 commissions between 1901 and 1909. Richard Nixon convoked 27 commissions in his first term, and by late last summer, Ronald Reagan had turned to special panels 23 times.

Traditionally, such blue-ribbon commissions simply gather facts on behalf of the president. Usually, they confront technical or administrative problems; sometimes, social issues; occasionally (as in the case of the Warren Commission charged to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy), a crisis. Though theoretically apolitical in nature, few have been entirely so. Jimmy Carter's Commission on Coal, for example, was designed to enhance the appeal of his energy program.

But last year, Reagan appointed three bipartisan commissions with explicitly political mandates. The Commission on Social Security and the Scowcroft Commission on the MX Missile broke legislative logjams not only by formulating policies, but also by devising schemes for easing compromise bills through Congress. The Kissinger Commission on Central America, still at work, has the same marching orders.

Why this resort to commissions? Twenty years ago, the president could haggle with a few key congressional party leaders and committee chairmen in forging a consensus. Currently, power on Capitol Hill is

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT



In a January 1983 cartoon, a bipartisan panel rushes a Social Security rescue package past congressional Republican and Democrat resistance.

fragmented. Even freshman legislators expect to have their say.

Now that Congress holds most of its committee meetings in public (only 19 percent are closed today, compared with 34 percent in 1953), legislators faced with demands from competing single-issue interest groups are relieved to let someone else make the hard decisions.

Government-by-commission, say the authors, may work for a time. But voters faced with the spectacle of a president and Congress unable to act on their own will soon lose all confidence in their government.

Back to the Grassroots?

"From Progress to Modernization: The Conservative Turn" by Sheldon S. Wolin, in *democracy* (Fall 1983), 43 West 61st St., New York, N.Y. 10023.

"I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past," wrote Thomas Jefferson, voicing the optimism that would fuel liberalism in America for most of this nation's history. The banner of "progress," however, has been seized by conservatives, writes Wolin, a Princeton political scientist.

While Ronald Reagan cheers up his countrymen with visions of a booming economy and an America growing "more healthy and beautiful each year," liberals see "limits to growth" and look backwards to the New Deal for inspiration. President Carter's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties, whose membership, says Wolin, was "an inventory of the liberal consensus," warned of a grim future for the cities of the Northeast and foresaw a "nearly permanent urban underclass."

The Founding Fathers' idea of "progress"—the vision of ever-increasing